

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-18

NEW YORK TIMES
22 SEPTEMBER 1981

Trial to Begin on Charge of Selling Codes to Soviet

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Special to The New York Times

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Sept. 21 — Jury selection for the trial of a former Army warrant officer charged with selling Soviet agents secret coding information in Paris in 1963 and 1964 began here today.

A list of 53 prospective witnesses, including retired Army Gen. William Westmoreland, who commanded United States forces in Vietnam, has been submitted to Federal District Court here, where the case against Joseph G. Helmich Jr. will be heard. The trial is expected to take two weeks.

The Federal Government contends that the secrets Mr. Helmich is accused of selling for \$131,000 could have enabled the Soviet Union to decipher and read American messages "scrambled" for security reasons during the Vietnam conflict.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which arrested Mr. Helmich July 15 at the Jacksonville Beach house of his father-in-law, has not said when or for how long the Soviets are thought to have used the coding information, or when the United States authorities found out about it. Indictments charging Mr. Helmich on three counts of espionage and one count of conspiracy, each of which carries a maximum sentence of imprisonment for life, imply that he has been under suspicion for 17 years. The F.B.I. has not said why he was not charged until now.

Mr. Helmich, 44 years old, was born in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., 44 years ago,

quit school in the ninth grade in 1952 and joined the Army in 1954. In 1963 and 1964, he was a "crypto custodian" with the United States Signal Corps in Paris, with responsibility for custody, handling, safeguarding and destruction of military code-making materials.

He is charged with selling the Soviet agents a KL-7 crypto system, which is a device about the size of a typewriter. It has a keyboard with which teletype messages are encoded by scrambling them into gibberish. The documents included maintenance and operating instructions. The indictments say that he met agents at the Soviet Embassy in Paris and at a Soviet trade mission there.

The indictments say that Mr. Helmich met Soviet agents again in 1980, in a purported effort to obtain more money. Law enforcement sources here say that Mr. Helmich met with the agents in Niagara Falls, N.Y., in the summer of 1980, at which time he came under F.B.I. surveillance.

Many Meetings With the F.B.I.

In a preliminary hearing in August, a Federal agent, Sammy J. Miller, testified that he and another agent walked into the Niagara Falls hardware store Mr. Helmich managed on Aug. 5, 1980. Mr. Miller said: "He asked me if he could help us. I said yes you can. I would like to talk to you about a matter of national security."

The agent testified that Mr. Helmich said, "Fine." Nine meetings, all of them in upstate New York, were held with Mr. Helmich through February 1981. Mr.

Helmich has testified last month that "the opening dialogue was basically threats and implied promise." He said the agents told him "if I didn't cooperate, I could go to jail for 35 years." Mr. Miller also said that initially Mr. Helmich did not think he had done wrong by selling the Soviets the equipment and information. "He didn't see he had done a whole lot wrong because he didn't think he gave the Soviets any classified information," Mr. Miller said.

Another F.B.I. agent, James K. Murphy, said he asked Mr. Helmich why he made the sale, and: "He replied — and I'm quoting — 'I'm not proud of what I did and I hate to think of the amount of damage I did.'"

Mr. Helmich had left the Army in 1966. After that, he, his wife and one child have lived in Miami, where he worked as a camera salesman; Augusta, Ga., and Aiken, S.C., where he sold automobiles; Niagara Falls, where he managed a hardware store, and Jacksonville, where in June he took a \$190-a-week job installing floor tiles.

Friends and relatives have said in interviews that the Helmichs have had a hand-to-mouth existence. His wife, Jean, said at the time of the arrest: "I've lived with him 24 years. I know where he's been. It's all a pack of lies." Bond was set at \$500,000. Mr. Helmich's court-appointed lawyer asked for a reduction, saying his client had only \$14 to his name. When the bond was reduced to \$400,000, Mr. Helmich laughed.

The jury selection is expected to take at least two more days.